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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**PHILOSOPHY OF STATECRAFT**

**REALIST OR IDEALIST?**

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Did the fundamental nature of national security change with the collapse of the Soviet Union? Can the spread of western values, the rewards of free market economies, and collective security eventually afford the world sufficient security? Is it time now to throw the old playbooks out and start to uphold Woodrow Wilson's vision of the world? The answer to each of these questions is distinctly no. Many of the problems we see around the world today -- inter-ethnic genocide; random acts of political violence; corruption or malfeasance leading to poverty; and regional hegemonists, to name but a few -- morally outrage the core values of most Americans. Unfortunately, tragedies like these, as dreadful as they are, cannot be prevented, only controlled. Herein lies the crux of the debate between idealists and realists. Though world conditions are different now, the basic assumptions and tenets that differentiate idealists from realists remain the same as they have for nearly two centuries. This paper will test five basic assumptions pertaining to the international security system against present conditions. It argues that realism is the optimal choice for the present setting and ultimately proposes some guideposts for development of a realist strategy for the United States.

Realists are so called because they seek to describe and explain the world on the basis of realities of the world as it is or has been. Nations are viewed in terms of relative power and by the nature of the geographic space they occupy. In looking at the world 'as it was,' realists should be credited with establishing the long periods of stability in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the balance of power that kept the peace between NATO and the Warsaw Pact for

more than 40 years. Idealists, on the other hand, want to contribute to a better world by promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts and developing new institutions and processes that would avert war. Regrettably, idealists do not have a similar record of success.

The difference between success and failure may rest on the assumptions about international relations that realists and idealists make. This paper looks at five realist assumptions. (1) States are the essential actors in international relations and each is free to act in accordance with its own best interest. As a result, the world is disordered. (2) States of different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds have intense rivalries that will not be silenced by an international order. (3) Certain states will act outside any framework, idealist or realist, and can threaten regional or global political equilibrium if their power is not checked. (4) International institutions are prone to inertia. (5) International institutions or processes carry ethical and moral codes, often European or American in pitch, which may be rejected or resented in some cultures.

### ***ASSUMPTIONS ATTESTING TO THE PRIMACY OF REALISM***

First, nations are autonomous players in international relations. While there will always be internal and external factors influencing strategies, states will interact with other states. States will act in their own best interest. This is because the international landscape is innately discordant and can only be managed by attaining relative equilibrium between competing states. Disorder can be mitigated, at best, by a balance of power. During the Cold War, the world seemed ordered because different sides knew where they stood in relation

to the others, even if that balance was mutually assured nuclear annihilation. Similarly, Bismarck's alliance system kept the powers in check by eventually arraying the great and lesser powers into two camps. While it increased their distrust of one another, it limited their freedom of action and kept peace for 30 years.

Today, idealists argue that the end of the Cold War and the emergence of global trends, such as economic globalization or interdependence, international social movements, and rapid global communications have created new players who either compete with or replace nations as the principal actors. Idealists submit that this trend towards globalization validates the natural orderliness of social interaction and primacy of western values *a priori*. For idealists, the principal threats to order are trans-national processes that can be controlled by international agreements. According to idealists, social order, western values, and economic growth prompt new motivations aside from just the power and survival of nation-states. Globalization therefore infers that it is more compelling now for states to pursue conflict resolution by promoting world order through negotiation and agreement in international and legal institutions.

Is the state-centric view of the world stage *passe*? Has it been replaced by views that are more focused on increased global processes and concerns? Among these processes, global economics is *primus inter pares* of the group, which includes communications, the environment and trans-national terrorism, to name a few. What has changed in economics to warrant consideration of this transposition? The movement of capital and a larger percentage of trade are

more transparent to governments. Some trade barriers are being liberalized and common currencies are being implemented. International institutions to control banking and trade are evolving. Multi-national corporations control a huge mass of the world's resources, such as labor, debt instruments, and natural resources. These multi-national corporations can link nations and people in a complex network. Their corporate decisions in one country can cause instability that can ripple through a region and cause a chain reaction in yet another capital. These corporations can negotiate with countries and with each other.

Clearly, there has been a paradigm shift in world economics, but not enough to usher in the end of the nation-state, or to say that the fate of economies are either beyond a nation-states' ability to craft, or that the economic growth of all economic powers are linked. Three factors illustrate why realists can still view economics as a tool of statecraft. (1) The shift has yet to negate the macro-economic tools of statecraft that a nation-state can employ, although it has weakened them. Governments can still impact macro-economies through tariffs, quotas, sanctions, trade agreements, and currency regulation. (2) National economies are not necessarily inescapably linked. The United States economy continues to grow while the economies of some Asian nations fall. Unemployment plagues some European countries, while employment rates remain favorable in the United States. (3) Finally, the international institutions that control or arbitrate world economic policies and practices remain limited in their ability to implement their decisions.

In short, the promise of interdependent economic growth and its upshot,

the proliferation of the information highway, have assuredly increased linkages between previously disparate nations and people. These processes impact world conditions and affect nations inherently, but as yet are not harbingers of a global village that might infer an idealist approach to protect and defend. In fact, some developments towards globalization in our current setting favor realism.

(1) In some countries, oligarchies will continue to prosper and the gap between rich and poor will grow, increasing the potential for instability. (2) Increased communications and information flow, coupled with the implantation of capitalism, could raise nascent expectations for prosperity and, hence, heighten tensions if they are not met. (3) The creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the European Union suggest economic power is being consolidated to form regional blocs which, in turn, strengthens the relative power and stability of regions. These regions could form geo-economic blocs that could compete with other blocs. Geo-economics will not displace geo-politics, but potentially reinforce it. As Joseph Nye describes, "restrictive regional blocs run against the nationalistic concerns of some of the lesser states that need a global system to protect them against domination by their large neighbors."<sup>1</sup> In sum, it is at best unclear and premature to believe that economic cooperation will render borders and nation-states unimportant, and a realistic approach obsolete.

The realists counter-argue that the emergent trans-national processes and entities are not actors in their own right, but are either a new condition or just another instrument of statecraft. Rather than being harbingers of a new order,

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Nye, "What New World Order," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1992, pages 83-96.

these elements reinforce the realist's sense of chronic disorder – much as Zionism, pan-Slavism, famines, or anarchism affected the powers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Idealists viewed the collapse of the Soviet Union and an end to super-power rivalries as an opportunity for the United Nations, unencumbered by Cold War frictions, to mediate conflict resolution through peaceful negotiations. This would be Wilson's League of Nation vision anew. This hope for implementation proved equally ephemeral. By January 1991, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990, a United States-led coalition of pro-western states was counter-attacking Iraqi forces after United Nations negotiations failed. Prospects for a new world order were dashed and our current period of unipolarity or American hegemony began in earnest.

There is no question today that the United States is the only superpower and that its power is unparalleled. At issue is how long it can shoulder the calling and what realistic system can be designed to replace or support it. Can trans-national actors deter China from acting on its designs on Taiwan, or keep India and Pakistan from another war? While the United States can provide no assurances in either case, we provide some potentially sober deterrence. The next framework for international relations must start from a realist assumption that nations are all potentially hostile and will pursue their own interests. Certain progress towards interdependence or globalization does not mean that the international system must mirror current global conditions. Hostile states will employ military force to pursue their interests – better odds of deterrence still rest



with states or groups of states of relative or greater power.

A second assumption supporting the case for a realist framework is simply that some long-standing ethnic, religious, and cultural discords may be unsolvable and will continue to destabilize regions. Many were dormant or just subordinated to the East-West global framework during the Cold War -- Croats, Serbs, and Bosniacs in Bosnia; Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda; and the Hindus and Moslems in South Asia. Samuel Huntington described cultural fault lines as the flash points of the future. Huntington recognized "nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations."<sup>2</sup> Though widely criticized in journals, Huntington illustrated that some conflicts are ancient, intense, endemic, and probably inescapable. These will not be prevented or easily adjudicated in an international forum.

Third, outlaw nations will resist the overtures of idealists and operate outside accepted rules and agreements. Additionally, other states can become recidivist as their relative power grows, or as their interests change. Notwithstanding its nuclear capability, Russia will eventually repair itself and revert to its traditional expansionist policies. Meanwhile, the threat of outlaw states is made even more dangerous because they may either have, or could obtain, weapons of mass destruction. Finally, these states are capable of allying together to complement or expand their relative power.

By the same token, idealist management of rogue states has not been

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, page 22.

successful. Inter-war idealists held conferences aimed at banning war to little notice. The League of Nations was impotent dealing with Italy and Germany. Eventually, Germany allied with other rogues -- Italy, the Soviet Union, and Japan. While they were not necessarily durable alliances, they improved the relative power of each and emboldened them during parts of World War II. More recently, the United States, not the United Nations, has been the principal agent controlling Libya, Iraq, and North Korea. Hans Binnendijk suggests that we should be cautious of a return to bipolarity if China and Russia strengthen security relationships. Compounding this potential, both may be increasing their cooperation with lesser rogue states. According to Binnendijk, the next bipolar world “would be based more on interests than on ideology.”<sup>3</sup>

A fourth assumption is that international organizations are prone to inertia, reluctant to act, or apply muscle to problems. The League of Nations was a failure. The United Nations held great promise during the early years of the Cold War and actively oversaw the end of colonialism and emergence of new states. In collective security matters, however, it was soon eclipsed by the Cold War superpowers. The end of the Cold War was inviting for the United Nations to take the lead in securing peace. Within a few years, however, events in Iraq and Yugoslavia exceeded United Nations capabilities. United States leadership of an ad hoc coalition and a NATO operation was required. Charles Krauthammer and George Modelski discuss American hegemony and the current period of

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Binnendijk with Alan Hendrickson, “Back to Bipolarity?,” *Strategic Forum*, National Defense University Institute for National Strategic Studies, Number 161, May 1999.

unipolarity. They assert it will be replaced by disorder and renewed rivalry as part of a cycle of history.<sup>4</sup> Idealists will minimize cyclic models and disregard the great power fates of Portugal, the Netherlands, and Great Britain.

Finally, some regions and cultures will resist or resent western or American values. Are free markets and democratic institutions preferable, or even feasible, in all societies? The prescription of these in unfamiliar or unprepared nations can cause greater turmoil. The rise of oligarchies and expectations could lead to domestic disturbances with regional and international consequences, like the awakening of ethnic or religious fundamentalism. Taken to a logical, if not profound, conclusion, such cultural differences could potentially lead to Huntington's clash of civilizations. The Boxer Rebellion in China, American relations with Iran, and western concern about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism over the last 20 years illustrate this concern.

### ***A WAY AHEAD***

The collapse of the Soviet Union ended the Cold War and bipolarity. The Soviet loss was paradoxical for the United States and the West – with victory arose less order and greater uncertainty. These are classic conditions for a realist framework. Nevertheless, the initial response to the fall of the Soviet Union was more euphoric than substantive. This expression was more fixed in idealism than realism.

By 1991, the "new world order" was frail and unsteady. The United States assumed global security responsibilities as the sole superpower. It

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Movement," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 70, Number 1 (1990-1991) and George Modelski, *The Long Cycle of Global Politics*

proved to be a time of greater uncertainty for four reasons. (1) Weapons of mass destruction continued to proliferate while command and control mechanisms were less discernible. (2) Some old ethnic conflicts were unobstructed by Cold War vestiges. (3) Some technological advances and progress towards globalization brought increased threats of asymmetrical information warfare

A decade following the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States must balance security responsibilities against its resources to mitigate fatigue. Superpower fatigue, writ United States fatigue, is the greatest threat to world order. Sharing both the responsibility and burden for security is inescapable. This requires designing a new international system that revives the classic tenets of the European balance of power on a global plane. It should be centered on spheres of influence. Saul Cohen described a poly-centric world where there are a number of separate centers of power that are responsible for equilibrium in their region and, in turn, counterbalance each other in global matters.<sup>5</sup> The United States is then in a position to maintain its power and exert itself as necessary to control matters as the only remaining superpower.

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and the Nation-State," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Saul Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a Divided World*, Random House, 1973.